

Newest Business Has Owner Reaching for the Sky

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By David Trembley

It took William Hussel a long time to find his niche in the business community, but the false starts of the past, he said, were all useful in planning the current success.

Hussel's company is called Chimney Doctors and is headquartered at W14277 Bobolink Ave., Menomonee Falls. The firm builds, restores, repairs and cleans chimneys of all kinds.

Chimney Doctors is only four years old but is already Wisconsin's largest repairer and cleaner of chimneys. The firm repairs or rebuilds more than 600 chimneys annually, he said, and serves Kenosha, Racine, Green Bay, the Fox River Valley, Madison and suburban Chicago as well as the metropolitan Milwaukee area.

Next June chimney Doctors will open an office in the Minocqua area, Hussel said, and then the firm intends to expand to either the Twin Cities or Detroit.

Hussel worked for Allis Chalmers after receiving an engineering degree from Ohio State University. However, he had visions of striking out on his own. Because his father was a carpenter, Hussel's first attempt at self-employment involved home construction. Throughout the 1970s, he said, they built one house a year "in his free time," but the high interest rates of the late-70s encouraged him to seek another kind of venture. "That was a time when you couldn't even give houses away," Hussel said. "It made me sure that I wanted to look for something that wasn't so dependent on the general state of the economy.

The experience also convinced me that I could enter any home improvement field that I wanted to."

Hussel decided to specialize in chimneys for three reasons. First, chimneys are among the first part of the house to need attention.

Second, there are safety factors that give chimney specialist a marketing edge. Third, and because of the first two reasons, people needing chimney work tend to look for a specialist.

"It's much like a medical specialty," Hussel said. "Hence the name of our firm.:"

For a brief period in the early '80s, Hussel was associated with MG Industries, a firm in the Menomonee Falls Industrial park that manufactures CNC robotic machines for the welding industry.

"Although most of my early experience was in heavy manufacturing, I didn't see a future there for a variety of reason," Hussel said. "The competition- even foreign competition- is intense, there's a chronic under-utilization of manufacturing capacity, and it requires significant financing.

Hussel believes the success of Chimney Doctors is not only due to marketing considerations but also to some internal management policies the firm has developed.

Virtually all employees, he said, are in some way compensated financially based on their productivity. Every employee has a profit sharing plan, for example, and whenever there is a customer complaint, account of the team involved is docked \$100.

The entire staff meets on every Monday morning, and all customer evaluation questionnaires are read aloud. Then each crew is provided with a schedule for the week, and productivity exceptions are specified.

A third management toll the firm employs is monthly meetings of crew leaders. Bonuses are announced during these meetings and are figured on the basis of the last month's performance.

"Of course, the key in the first place is proper training," Hussel said. "Each worker must pass the National Chimney Guild's certifying examination before they are left alone on the job, but assuming that the competence, I think our success is due to the fact that our employees know how well they do is dependent upon how well the company does, and the play a significant part in the determination."

Hussel's advice for those who need chimney work done is to check out thoroughly the qualifications of prospective contractors.

"Don't go with the fly-by-nights, who are canvassing the community," he said. "Make sure the workers have passed that qualifying exam, and check with Better Business Bureau for the reputation of the company."

A reputable firm, Hussel said, should provide a thorough inspection of the rooftop, attic, firebox, and foundation as part of the cleaning. How often a chimney needs cleaning depends on how often the fireplace is used, what kind of wood is burned, whether woodstove or a fireplace insert, and how the chimney was built and where it is located with regard to exterior walls.

As a general rule of thumb, he said, cleaning should be scheduled after every cord or two of wood has been burned, and no matter how much use the fireplace has had, at least every 3-4 years.

Chimney Doctors had been such a successful business venture the Hussel has considered the possibility of franchising it. For now, however, he has chosen the more conservative method of training managers for new offices from within the current firm, with the ultimate goal of establishing independently-owned offices beyond the firm's current service area.